

## **The Effect of Consumer Perceived Ethicality of Firms on Consumer Brand Relationships**

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### **Resumo**

The research stream on ethical business behavior evidences inherently controversial challenges within the Consumer-Brand Relationships (CBR) framework. This study aims to test an integrative CBR and Consumers' Ethicality Perception model. The research is operationalized through a field experiment (survey) focusing on ethical and unethical stimuli effects on consumer brand relationships. Stimuli demonstrated direct and indirect impacts of the Consumer's Perceived Ethicality on several CBR constructs, showing that an unethical stimulus would cause immediate consequences on Trust reduction with detrimental implications on Brand Equity. The results suggest a broadening of the construct's scope for consumption in countries with lower levels of firm's ethical behavior such as in emerging economies. The main contribution of this paper is to consolidate a CBR integrative model and demonstrating how CBR development is affected by Consumer Perceived Ethicality.

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### ABSTRACT

The research stream on ethical business behavior evidences inherently controversial challenges within the Consumer-Brand Relationships (CBR) framework. This study aims to test an integrative CBR and Consumers' Ethicality Perception model. The research is operationalized through a field experiment (survey) focusing on ethical and unethical stimuli effects on consumer brand relationships. Stimuli demonstrated direct and indirect impacts of the Consumer's Perceived Ethicality on several CBR constructs, showing that an unethical stimulus would cause immediate consequences on Trust reduction with detrimental implications on Brand Equity. The results suggest a broadening of the construct's scope for consumption in countries with lower levels of firm's ethical behavior such as in emerging economies. The main contribution of this paper is to consolidate a CBR integrative model and demonstrating how CBR development is affected by Consumer Perceived Ethicality.

**Keywords:** Ethics; Consumer-Brand Relationships; Consumer Perceived Ethicality; Consumer Behavior; Brand Equity

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in the number of research studies conducted in the field of ethics and social responsibility (Wilkie & Moore, 2012). Ethical behavior of a company is assumed to affect consumers' impressions about their brand and its products and services. Efforts to integrate ethical perceptions of consumers and brands with issues related to marketing, ethics and social responsibility often proved controversial, and years of research has presented challenges and conflicting views for researchers and managers (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Zhang et al., 2017). Specifically, Sierra et al. (2017) argue that, despite the representative number of studies relating ethics to marketing, research on ethics in the branding field is still scarce. Moreover, research on consumer brand relationships gains momentum (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017; Fetscherin & Heilman, 2015). According to Fetscherin & Heilman (2015), this relationship can be understood through a Consumer-Brand Relationship Theory. However, despite the heightened importance of the theme, an empirically validated comprehensive and integrative model on Consumer Brand Relationships is still missing (Breivik & Thorbjørnsen, 2008; Kim, Holland & Han, 2013; Sreejesh & Roy, 2015).

On the other hand, a concept that has increasingly attracted the interest of researchers refers to Consumer Perceived Ethicality, which explains consumers' perception of a company's ethical level (Brunk, 2010). Its measurement is done generally by a CPE scale proposed by Brunk (2012) having been especially in developed countries. However, differences of ethical and unethical behaviors between developed and developing/ emerging countries have been recurrent in literature. Hence, the operationalization of empirical studies of these differences comes to the fore (Rossouw, 1994; Arli & Lasmono, 2009). Thus, this research explores the holistic formation of Consumer-Brand Relationships, aiming to contribute to the validation of an integrative CBR model and to identify the effects of Consumers' Ethicality Perception. In this sense, it will seek evidences of an integrative model of CBR stages with Consumer Perceived Ethicality as an independent construct. This integration of Ethics and Branding

theories (CPE-CBR) will be studied through a nomological chain of antecedents and consequences of the process of the development of relationships between consumers and brands.

## **2 THEORETHICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Firm's Ethical Behavior and Consumers**

In recent years, consumer research on the perception of ethical corporate practices and corporate social responsibility has been recurrent, often aimed at verifying its impacts on business performance and possible leverage of competitive advantage (Chabowski, Mena & Gonzalez-Padron, 2011). On the other hand, Consumer Perceived Ethicality is defined by Brunk & Bluemelhuber (2011) as the consumers' aggregate perception of a subject's morality (company, brand, product, or service). According to Brunk (2011), consumer explanations of CPE illustrate the simultaneous application of deontological (norms-based) and teleological (outcome-based) considerations for ethical judgment, and the consumers' evaluation can be a mix of both streams of ethical theory. Brunk and Bluemelhuber (2011) conducted a research that aimed to explore the nature of consumers' ethical perceptions. Three complementary researches were carried out using qualitative and quantitative techniques, culminating in the specification, conceptualization and validation of the scale of Consumer Perceived Ethicality.

### **2.2 Consumer-Brand Relationships**

According to Blackston (1992), the consumer-brand relationship is a logical extension of the personality of the brand, resembling the relationship between people. Fournier (1998) suggests that the brand relationship is an emotional bond resulting from the interaction between consumers and brands (Kaufmann et al., 2012). Sreejesh (2014), Sreejesh & Roy (2015) designed studies using a mixed methods approach that explored the integration of attitudinal, behavioral and conceptual constructs, aiming at proposing an integrated model of Consumer-Brand Relationships development. In the first phase of his work, qualitative research was carried out to understand the dimensions of CBR, from the perspective of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The attitudinal phase of the CBR (Consumer-Brand Relationships) would have three fundamental stages: cognitive, affective and conative (Oliver, 1997, 1999). At the cognitive stage, consumers develop the attitude strength by comparing the brand and its alternatives, based on past experiences and / or knowledge related to the offer, brand attributes, performance, or information (Sreejesh, 2014; Oliver, 1997; Blackston, 1992). The second stage of the CBR consists is an affective one, in which a deepening of the relationship takes place. The third stage refers to the maintenance of the relationship or conative stage, in which the consumer develops a situation of commitment with the brand, deciding to continue with that brand, also anticipating a future purchase option. Finally, the relationship results or behavioral outcome phase would consist of brand equity, brand loyalty, purchase intention and positive word of mouth.

## **3 HYPOTHESES AND MODEL DEVELOPMENT**

According to Brunk & Blumelhuber (2011), consumers appreciate the company as a responsible member of society, and this can impact brand equity, trust, commitment and attachment to it (Brunk & Blumelhuber, 2011). Similarly, for Wu & Chen (2015) consumers gain confidence in a brand when they evaluate the company as behaving ethically. Bejou, Ennew & Palmer (1998) verified significant impact of ethical perception on trust in financial

services. Therefore, it is expected that Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) affects attitudes toward a company and trust (Brunk, 2010). Chinomona (2013) identified that consumer experience with the brand significantly and positively influences satisfaction, trust, and brand attachment. Similar results proposed and tested by Sreejesh (2014), that observed that consumer's attitudes towards a brand affect trust and satisfaction. In addition, Arjoon & Rambocas (2011) provided empirical support for a direct positive relationship between customer perception of ethics and customer loyalty with brand commitment acting as a mediator. Nga & Mun (2013) elicited that brand trust had a significant positive relationship with consumer ethical perceptions of a firm. Similar results were obtained by Singh, Iglesias & Foguet (2012). Derived from these sources, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H01: Consumer Perceived Ethicality has a significant effect on brand trust.

H02: Consumer Perceived Ethicality has a significant effect on commitment.

H03: Consumer Perceived Ethicality has a significant effect on brand attachment.

Chiu, Huang & Yen (2010) hold that consumers, who trust a brand, are willing to improve and maintain affective bonds with the brand, and observed relationships between brand trust and brand attachment, as observed empirically by Sreejesh (2014) and Chinomona & Maziriri (2017). Brand trust is often emphasized as one of the essential elements for consumers to develop a sense of commitment to this partner (Bloemer & Oderkerken-Schröder, 2002; Chaudhuri & Hoolbrook, 2002). Sreejesh (2014) observed empirically this relation in a consumer brand relationship model. In this sense, Morgan & Hunt (1994) proposed that trust and commitment are related constructs. Dennis et al. (2016) also observed significant effect of brand trust on commitment. Verifying the effect of trust on brand equity in the mobile phone market, Dib's & Alhaddad's (2014) found a positive significant impact. Sreejesh (2014) verified empirically the impact of trust on brand equity in comprehensive a consumer brand relationship model. Furthermore, in the marketing literature, attachment is considered as an essential element for the development of brand loyalty and increase equity (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Dennis et al. (2016) concluded that brand attachment is the main antecedent of the brand's strength, affecting satisfaction, trust and commitment as well as brand equity. Park, MacInnis, & Priester (2009 p.8) argument that brand attachment has a positive correlation with brand equity. These observations agree with the research of Sreejesh (2014). Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H04: Brand trust has a significant effect on brand attachment.

H05: Brand trust has a significant effect on brand commitment.

H06: Brand trust has a significant effect on brand equity.

H07: Brand attachment has a significant effect on brand commitment.

Schmalz & Orth (2012) concluded that commitment was identified as a moderator of negative or unethical information effects on brands' attitudes and evaluations (Rohini, Robert & Unnava, 2000). Keller (1993, 2001) argues that the construction of brand equity is due to brand commitment, a finding, which is confirmed by empirically by Sreejesh (2014). Dick & Basu (1994) as well as Hess & Story (2005) argue that committed consumers tend to develop positive attitudes toward brands. Dennis et al. (2016) observed significant impact of brand commitment on brand equity reinforcing its importance. In this sense, Zhang (2015) observed that brand equity could be leveraged by commitment and value in on line communities of consumers. On the other hand, the relationship between brand commitment and loyalty has been recurrent in the literature. Hur et al. (2010) observed relationships among commitment, loyalty and purchase intention. Fullerton (2003, 2005a, 2005b) explored and observed the effects of

commitment on loyalty. Therefore, we conclude on the beneficial effects of commitment and loyalty reflected in a positive relationship (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001) and hypothesize:

H08: Brand commitment has a significant effect on brand equity.

H09: Brand commitment has a significant effect on brand loyalty.

H10: Brand commitment has a significant effect on purchase intention.

Coob-Walgren, Ruble & Donthu (1995) analyzed two datasets of data and observed that brands with the higher brand equity generated significantly greater preferences and purchase intentions. Esch, Langner & Geus (2006) verified the impacts of brand image and brand awareness on purchase intentions of consumers. In the same direction, Jalilvand, Samiei & Mahdavinia (2011) observed the effect of brand equity components on purchase intention in the automobile Industry. Moreover, Sreejesh (2014) verified the impact of brand equity on brand loyalty in a consumer-brand relationship framework. Dlacic & Kezman (2014) observed empirically that elements of brand equity do increase customer brand loyalty in the pharmaceutical market. In this sense, Taylor, Celuch and Goodwin (2004), in a nation-wide sample of industrial customers, obtained results that suggest that brand equity and trust are consistently the most relevant antecedents to both behavioral and attitudinal forms of customer loyalty. In this sense, we proposed the next hypotheses:

H11: Brand equity has a significant effect on the purchase intention.

H12: Brand equity has a significant effect on brand loyalty.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

To accomplish the objectives of the research, the work was designed in two phases. The first phase was qualitative and exploratory in nature comprising four focus groups to explore ethical relations between companies and consumers. The groups contributed to explore the concept of Consumer Perceived Ethically according to the proposal of Brunk (2012) in an emergent country scenario. The results suggested two additional dimensions of Perceived Ethicality: consumers' respect and firms' corruption. The second phase was quantitative. In this phase a face-to-face survey collected 538 questionnaires on March 2017. One half of the respondents received a questionnaire that reported (stimuli) about unethical behavior of the smartphone manufacturer and the other half a description that related to an ethical behavior. These are the sources of the scales: Brand Attachment - Park et al. (2010); Brand Trust - He, Li & Harris (2012); Brand Commitment (Eisingerich & Rubera (2010); Brand Equity -Yoo & Donthu (2001); Brand Loyalty- Petzer et al. (2014); Consumer Perceived Ethicality- Brunk (2012) and qualitative phase.

## 5 RESULTS

### 5.1 Sample Profile

The sample consisted of men (52%) and women (48%), with a family income of R \$ 2,001 to 6,000 (46%), or more than R \$ 9,000 (23%), aged between 19 and 35 years (85%), mean age of 25 years ( $s = 7.9$ ), predominantly incomplete tertiary level (75%) and single marital status (87%). The brands that dominated the research are Samsung and Apple, and 68.3% of consumers own these brands and answered the questionnaire about them.

### 5.2 Preliminary Data Analysis

Data analysis started with preliminary procedures, such as the identification of uni and multivariate outliers, missing values and verification of linearity, normality and multicollinearity assumptions. The problems were punctual, except for the high deviation of

normality that indicated the need to test the research model using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) technique.

### 5.3 Construct Validity and Dimensionality

To verify the dimensionality of the scales, we used the Exploratory Factorial Analysis of the scales (Principal Components - Screeplot and eigenvalue criterion). Results indicated one-dimensional solutions in all cases, with commonalities greater than 0.500, variance explained (Kaiser-Meyer-Olsen) considered "very good" (Hair et al., 2010). The validity of the measurements was assessed using the model of simultaneous equations with latent variables (Netemeyer, Bearden & Sharma, 2003), applying PLS. In the convergent validity phase, as Bagozzi, Yi and Phillips (1991) suggest, the factorial loads of the constructs were significant at the level of 5% or 1% (through single-tailed tests. To evaluate the variance shared within factor items and between factors, the discriminant validity of the scales was evaluated using Fornell & Larcker (1981) procedures. The Composite Reliability (CC), Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Cronbach's Alpha (CA) measures were also calculated. The results demonstrate that there was discriminant validity with moderate correlations between constructs. In terms of measurement quality, the data showed good adequacy, since the Average Extracted Variance (AVE) exceeded 0.500 (Bollen, 1989), and the Cronbach Alpha (AC) and Composite Reliability (CC) reliability measures exceed 0,700.

### 5.4 Test of the Hypothetical Model

The models on ethical and unethical groups, which received the experimental stimuli, were tested separately for comparisons. Model fit and results were considered adequate (Stoner-Gleiser (Q2) and GoF). The results are presented in Table 1:

**Table 1 – Test of Model Hypotheses**

Relations	Group = Unethical			Group = Ethical			Difference	
	Sample	Error	t Value	Sample	Error	t Value	SS	Sig.
Attachment -> Commitment	0,450	0,049	9,224	0,552	0,045	12,287	1,53	0,13
Commitment -> Purc. Intention	0,534	0,066	8,064	0,557	0,065	8,518	0,24	0,81
Commitment -> Loyalty	0,528	0,065	8,160	0,607	0,050	12,119	0,97	0,33
Commitment -> Brand Equity	0,660	0,068	9,698	0,553	0,045	12,202	-1,31	0,19
Trust -> Attachment	0,169	0,079	2,128	0,223	0,091	2,438	0,45	0,66
Trust -> Commitment	0,293	0,058	5,038	0,180	0,068	2,670	-1,26	0,21
Trust -> Brand Equity	0,098	0,071	1,381	0,270	0,046	<b>5,850</b>	<b>2,03</b>	<b>0,04</b>
Brand Equity -> Purc.Intention	0,422	0,068	6,194	0,332	0,062	5,319	-0,98	0,33
Brand Equity -> Loyalty	0,446	0,067	6,619	0,334	0,056	5,922	-1,27	0,20
C.P.Ethicality -> Attachment	0,433	0,078	5,565	0,275	0,093	2,960	-1,31	0,19
C.P.Ethicality -> Commitment	0,191	0,071	2,685	0,203	0,053	3,821	0,13	0,89
C.P.Ethicality -> Trust	0,650	0,050	12,918	0,652	0,046	14,211	0,03	0,98

SOURCE: Research data. Observations: a) SAMPLE is the standardized weight obtained for complete sample; b) The error is the estimated error of the estimate; c) The value t is the ratio of the weight not standardized by its standard error. d) is significance of the relation.



## 6 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The CBR stages model analyzed presents consistency findings from the results because: (a) their hypothetical relationships and proposed stages are grounded in previous studies and field literature; (b) the relationships between the constructs of each stage are significant suggesting integration; (c) the level of explanation of the constructs of the fourth stage (results) are relatively high, suggesting their nomological consistency (GoF of 61% and 57%,  $R^2$  of 52.6% to 81.6% of final constructs); (d) the relationships between the constructs of distinct stages are significant, suggesting a nomological chain sequence of effects. The results preliminarily demonstrate similarities and differences between the groups. In both models, loyalty is explained primarily by commitment ( $\beta = 0.607$  ethical and  $\beta = 0.528$  unethical), followed by the Brand Equity ( $\beta = 0,334$  ethical and  $\beta = 0,446$  unethical), which shows that companies with higher Commitment and Brand Equity will be less affected from actions of negative Ethical Perceptions. Considering the greater stability of commitment to the stimulus, unethical stimuli would cause greater damage to a brand with medium and low levels of commitment/brand equity. Similar results were found for the antecedents of the purchase intention, which receives an impact of Commitment ( $\beta = 0.585$  (ethical group) and  $\beta = 0.542$  (unethical group)), followed by Brand Equity ( $\beta = 0,332$  ethical and  $\beta = 0.422$  unethical). Regarding the antecedents of Brand Equity, it was observed that the results significantly differ between the ethical and unethical groups. While in the ethical group there is a significant direct impact ( $\beta = 0.270$ ), in the unethical group the same path is not significant. Thus, the results suggest that in situations of unethical behavior, Commitment (weights of  $\beta = 0.553$  ethical and  $\beta = 0.660$  unethical impact in Brand Equity), which is more stable than Brand Trust, would mediate or even mitigate the effect of the decline of Brand Trust on Brand Equity. Consistently, the explanatory capacity of the ethical and unethical models regarding to Brand Equity are similar (53.9% ethical and 52.6% unethical), suggesting that there is a transfer of Brand Trust for Commitment to explain Brand Equity in the unethical group. An analysis of the direct impacts of Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) on the Consumer-Brand Relationship development demonstrates that its greatest direct impact is on Brand Trust ( $\beta = 0.652$  ethical and  $\beta = 0.650$  unethical). Consumers subject to unethical stimuli may feel "betrayed", while consumers subject to ethical stimuli strongly reinforce their Trust and, therefore, Brand Equity. Finally, it was observed that in the unethical group, CPE promoted an impact of  $\beta = 0.433$  and  $\beta = 0.275$  in ethical group on Brand Attachment, suggesting its influences on brand relationships development.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

The main contributions of this research can be categorized in two dimensions; firstly, by exploring and describing how Consumer Perceived Ethicality affects the development of the Consumer-Brand Relationships in a holistic model; secondly, referring to explore and validate the CPE scale from the perspective of emerging countries, in which the issue of business ethics has different aspects. The results revealed a significant decline in relationship elements such as Trust, Brand Equity, Purchase Intention and Loyalty, with an intensity higher than in the Commitment (comparing groups), suggesting a greater stability of this last construct. From a managerial perspective, this suggests the possibility of recovering from a brand ethical crisis based on committed groups of consumers as it happened with Harley Davidson. An analysis of the unethical group model reveals that Brand Trust no longer impacts the Brand Equity,

suggesting that it remains supported by the remaining Commitment. Therefore, Trust is the main and first victim of unethical behavior in a Consumer-Brand Relationships perspective.

Regarding the measurement of CPE (Consumer Perceived Ethicality), the work uses, validates and extends Brunk's (2012) scale in an emerging country, suggesting an addition of two items (consumer respect and corruption). This means the possibility of generalization of the scale and a higher replication level in the global context. Summarizing, the work contributes to this still emerging research field by exploring relations between Ethics and Brands, analyzing the impacts of Consumer Perceived Ethicality on a Consumer-Brand Relationships development framework, in a scenario where ethics presents an even more significant relevance for the generations. The work proposes the extension of the CPE scale to the reality of emerging countries, finalizing with empirical evidence and propositions regarding the impacts of Consumer Perceived Ethicality on Consumer-Brand Relationships.

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